

In the deserts of the heart  
Let the healing fountain start,  
In the prison of his days  
Teach the free man how to praise

W.H. Auden

Free Poetry publishes essays and poetry by today's leading poets. These chapbooks are available free of charge and without copyright. The editor encourages the reproduction of this chapbook and its free distribution ad infinitum.

For further information please contact the editor at:

[mcsmith@boisestate.edu](mailto:mcsmith@boisestate.edu)

# FREE POETRY

Sara Nicholson

Good For Burning

Vol. 8 No. 1 January 2014



that hyacinths would cure us  
of our love for fire

Convinced of our value  
we concoct our metaphors,  
lash out at romance  
Imagine, though, that this  
were not a sentence  
but a projector. That what  
you're witnessing is not  
a flare-up per se, but  
the collapse of some abstract  
yet devastating trope

There are no stars to diagnose  
the wonder we feel when  
we look up at them  
In springtime muscles'll  
grow on the trees  
I reach my hands into your  
seasonal affective disorder  
only to discover that  
the night has its idiom,  
the insects their paper,  
that the sky draws no pictures  
we're able to recognize  
I suffer from neurasthenia,  
the painter's disease, besides  
it's not for you to kill me  
I have a stomach in my heart

# GOOD FOR BURNING

Sara Nicholson

vouchsafe us an outfit  
to don in heaven, I'll squat  
here in my cradle of dirt

Today, there are no ghosts  
maundering on about flowers  
(thank god) and the most  
romantic act will be  
to make a website for you  
Tonight, dear reader,  
you'll be trapped betwixt  
schmaltz and forsythia  
The very air will open  
when you speak

Poems may be writ naturally  
or by caesarean section  
I embrace this maxim  
as though it were a worm  
What little I know  
about the history of art  
I've summarized as follows:  
Lascaux's in need of a gardener  
Altamira's a plume of smoke  
The swan'll go extinct  
b/c the passenger pigeons  
have set fire to the earth  
A tree apologized for crying,  
rued its mawkishness  
We were stupid if we thought

## A CONVALESCENT'S SUN

The forest housed a dryad  
though I figured  
the wind would banish it  
The economy, ever so secret,  
whispered that oak is crueller  
perchance than moss  
The reader does not sway  
but cradles the furniture  
when she drinks too much  
I'm partial to words  
with an X and Y in them—  
calyx, possibly sphinx  
Our favorite egyptologist  
was born in the middle  
of the nineteenth century  
He drew lines on paper b/c  
the rose in its sarcophagus  
had yet to bloom

My own lament for fashion  
involves not polyester  
but muslin, velvet, crinoline  
I'm a researcher and I  
take fabric from the tombs  
A whalebone skirt's as good  
as any summa theologica  
Though the angels wouldn't

Yet the specter of the witches continued to haunt the imagination of the ruling class. In 1871, the Parisian bourgeoisie instinctively returned to it to demonize the female Communards, accusing them of wanting to set Paris aflame. There can be little doubt, in fact, that the models for the lurid tales and images used by the bourgeois press to create the myth of the petroleuses were drawn from the repertoire of the witch-hunt. As described by Edith Thomas, the enemies of the Commune claimed that thousands of proletarian women roamed (like witches) the city, day and night, with pots full of kerosene and stickers with the notation "B.P.B." ("bon pour bruler," "good for torching"), presumably following instructions given to them as part of a great conspiracy to reduce Paris to ashes in front of the troops advancing from Versailles. Thomas writes that "petroleuses were to be found everywhere. In the areas occupied by the Versailles army it was enough that a woman be poor and ill-dressed, and that she be carrying a basket, box, or milk-bottle to be suspected" (Thomas 1966: 166-67). Hundreds of women were thus summarily executed, while the press vilified them in the papers. Like the witch, the petroleuse was depicted as an older woman with a wild, savage look and uncombed hair. In her hands was the container for the liquid she used to perpetrate her crimes.

—Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*

## A TATTOO ON MY LOVER'S ARM

Not English enough to say "whilst"  
though I speak the right dialect

I troll the earth for foliage  
and add a sequin to my waist

The neighborhood's a silent film  
while I ride shotgun

The East Coast needs no axioms  
when the smoke appears

My calendar leaves little room  
for the burning of corpses

My planner puts me in the forest  
a month from yesterday

Your flesh is inked with omens  
though I can't quite read them

Crows are your insignia  
They look pernicious in the heat

of a garden I don't own, a garden  
I rent. I'm convinced that the rose  
is flammable. When I set it on fire  
with the rest of the garbage, it burns.

## GOOD FOR BURNING

The soldiers caught us unawares  
as we slept inside the garden.  
I have no right to say “we” so I  
am disappointed with stones.  
We can’t tell branches from landscape  
architecture, the sun from a candle  
that floods the arrondissement with light.  
Whatever those little purple flowers  
suppose themselves to resemble  
as they climb the fence, they’re vexed  
by our enclosures. The grasshopper’s  
abstracted from its only act, the hop.  
They hit me up at the ATM where  
they (the soldiers) know I (the poet)  
am most likely to lose my shit.  
When the leaves’ve helicoptered down  
from that obnoxious tree, the maple,  
I’ll fling my roses sheepishly  
at the foxholes carved by dawn.  
I’ve never been one for falsifying  
the thoughts of my superiors.  
If I climbed this fence, my landlord  
would annex starlings from the lawn.  
Now the walls with my extinguisher  
draw attention to the fact that  
my house is not yet burning. It seems  
my purpose is not to wreck anything  
but to sleep inside the wreckage

## OFTEN I AM PERMITTED TO RETURN TO “OFTEN I AM PERMITTED TO RETURN TO A MEADOW”

As if it were a scene made-up by the mind  
of who-the-hell-knows. My mind  
looks for those archaeologies that yield  
the oldest relics. My instincts tell me  
a meadow does not augur the wind.  
I’ve put my stock in craftsmanship  
but lack the proper tools—a meme  
of the grass blowing east against  
the source of who-knows-what.  
My sources lead me back to a meadow.  
My tools have wounded no daimons  
though my hammer strikes a fawn.  
The stars sans their harmonies  
will nonetheless follow the tempo  
tradition has allotted them. My mind  
hears nothing that my arms and legs do.  
The meadow’s put on trial with us as  
eyewitnesses, a darkling field for proof.  
Alpha has the right to remain silent. Omega  
can be used against you in a court of law.

## EDDA FOR LARKS

I recognize the onset of morning  
from Jupiter's transit. I traded spit  
for a kitchen garden and when  
the Ozarks failed me, I spoke up.  
The field guides all say to me that  
birds're as estranged from their labor  
as they are from speech.  
Typically, the wrens make haste  
to form a gauntlet of stars  
and they nest there in their anger,  
emboldened by capital, let loose  
as if the desert were a nook.  
So when I find the branches  
flowering with metallic petals  
I realize that OD'ing on oxygen's  
much better than it sounds.  
When Williams wrote of Jacataqua,  
being racist, he wrote about himself,  
not the myth of the indigenous.  
His sketch of the princess, not  
the princess herself, being beautiful  
beyond description. It is 7:22 a.m.

## LOVERS OF THE THIRD ESTATE

The trees withdrew their savings  
from the wreckage of a bank.  
The bank, I mean, the world itself  
profits off chlorophyll, the same  
as we do. I wonder if I'll die  
in my dream tonight, if I'll collapse  
from a lack of airflow, a lack of \$  
to my lungs. Emphyzema's  
a beautiful word to holler at trees  
though they will not answer you.  
I know that dirt cavorts with worms  
in the same way children do.  
A four-year-old supposed a fairy  
inhabited her bedroom. She held  
her pencil like a banker and wrote  
in a language only she could read.



## HEGEL

A few texts into the symphony  
and I'm already wasted.  
My cell phone looks like an oboe  
with a smaller hole. Moths can  
no more flutter over the orchestra  
than we can piss on them.  
No phantom has my back except  
the Spirit of form. It might be  
the bottle of wine in the forest  
that's helping me to sleep.  
It could also be the philosopher  
with his portion of snow.

and I think that I am beautiful  
and racist, certainly envious of those  
who minus a hawser, attempt  
to draw the wildlife toward them.  
Birds shift from quartet to quintet  
when neurons hang in the trees.  
Their brains are too simple to tell  
holly from ilex, too small for flight.

## COUNTRY LANES TO KAFKA

One by one, the children follow me.  
I felt Cro-Magnon in the heat.

The leaves, by dint of electricity,  
recharge themselves during a storm

though not without trembling.  
The autumn says it will fossilize us too.

At vespers, we reverse our growth  
and shrink back into childhood.

At midnight, we could not deny  
the immortality of the soul.

A wasp's on my head, a mammoth's  
behind me, an angel will hibernate

when the lake freezes over.  
I saw you lolling in the meadow

but you didn't see me. You looked  
so prehistoric with your ferns.

## MALTA DONTCHA

It's awkward walking around  
with a cheval in my purse.  
We called the weather a despot  
because it scattered the cobblestones  
with leaves. Louis Quatorze  
could beat the shit out of Henri  
no question. He lives on this island  
and has the reflexes of stones.  
An intermezzo to ease the boredom  
I feel when I look at his portrait.  
A bottle of wine for him, my sovereign,  
where he sits in need of a song.  
I prefer the Compleat Angler  
to alcohol, wine to heraldry,  
a coat of arms to MSNBC.  
One way to find solace is to burn  
that hundred-dollar sweater.  
One way to scatter your buckshot  
is to bury yourself with a gun.

## THE PEACHES OF SAMARKAND

New York didn't ask for its weapons.  
Rome was not fisted in a day.

To enter the city, I leave behind the ice.  
My heart, though, never left my body.

Ice is nothing like music because  
it impoverishes what is called "warmth."

We sang of thunder but forgot the idiom.  
We buried ourselves in leaves.

The wind leaves hexes in our field of vision.  
The ocean lays claim to the particulars.

They said, it makes no difference  
whether children are born of the earth

or if they consent to the song we sang  
about thunder, forgetting the words.

If the scythe is my instrument, what music  
would my children make, if I had any?

What songs would my son write to murder  
the city? He has no love for the cello.

What fruit would my daughter offer up  
to the king? She crushes her fiddle in June.

## RAMON FERNANDEZ

There was a mirror in the provinces  
that could imitate the sun  
better than those other artifacts  
we call "reflective." Just so, a whirlpool  
resembles the movement of children  
before we eat them. I eat them.  
I am an eater of children. I suppose  
a certain angle makes this possible  
as it makes possible all that is tough  
to reconcile with beauty. The way  
I see it, the valley isn't concave  
nor the mountains convex.  
Horses in the fourteenth century  
were called palfreys, chargers, steeds  
and the people ate them just as  
I do their progeny. Either it rained  
on the spider, or it will rain on a spider  
but not both. We stress our independence  
yet most of us would rather yield  
to a poem than to the eponymous sea.

## GOETHE

It began on my birthday. I wrote out invitations in a neat hand. Then I demanded the aid of my servants, and each of them offered me a gift—Mary her carpet of dead pine needles, Laura her curtains, Melissa her hair. That summer, our house was full of curiosities. I killed a raccoon, and a desolate smell took up residence with us. I almost said “wafted” but that isn’t quite right. Nothing “wafts” except odors, though anything gaseous could conceivably waft. In August, I read the Koran backwards. It taught me to look for the gothic in flowers, and for blood in a very young girl. At this time, my household was surviving on consommé, which my servants and I drank from a bowl made of wood. The broth had a complex flavor. I felt so eighteenth-century when I vomited it up.

## THE HUNT

I seldom think of a mountain  
surrounded by doves. A window  
separates me from the doves as it  
separates me from the mountain.  
I called the Italians Etruscan  
and through their forests, I cut my swath.  
I’m all for the woodlands  
because not much is poisonous.  
I advocate eating everything you see.  
A gardener produces the wine but  
the grapes he never could counterfeit.  
I called the vineyard Endymion  
because it gratifies the moon.  
I’ve a predator in me, you’ve a hunter  
in you—the face of an oyster  
with the body of a snake.  
Hortense was a swag of pearls  
and she interiorized it. The feeling  
that she had been harvested  
by some poet, a gardener perhaps,  
from the bottom of the sea.

## NICK, BRING ME MY SLIPPERS

I have no thoughts about the night  
without the thought of murder.  
The night must eat the constellations  
and carbon-date the stars.  
I have built for myself a nexus  
out of wallpaper, constructed it  
as a book is usually constructed.  
I'm oblivious to our history and  
its pages are spoiled and foxed.  
When hominids lived on fruit  
and barn swallows practiced  
their flight through the egresses,  
I was building a fortress and we  
were not yet at war with the sky.  
The trees encourage my howitzer  
to keep on destroying them.  
Ne travaillez jamais if you're rich  
and if not, rehearse well your parables  
for the world we've all created  
would love to bury you in salt.

## THE GARDEN OF MILEY CYRUS

Emptied of its magic, the grass  
believes our stories, collapses like blood  
into a house we don't remember.  
A life we never lived exists in theory,  
a house that wasn't was. Example:  
I ate the olives for breakfast.  
If I could I would look toward you  
as toward this bowl of olives  
I'm eating, the green ones I've eaten,  
the black ones I've always already ate.  
Say I hated the songs on your mixtape.  
Say tree, philosophy, ghost,  
or some other word abused by this poet.  
The pioneers placed cobwebs  
over their wounds to arrest the bleeding.  
I, like them, knew nothing  
about medicine so ipso facto magic  
became my remedy. Is my medicine.  
Later, I found some mushrooms  
of the "destroying angel" kind.

## OF PRIMOGENITURE AND VIOLETS

Minus punctuation, I get all girly.  
The flowers're wandering over the ice.

I've committed myself to everything  
I shouldn't commit myself to—

the O of poetry, the omichron that's  
ghosted its way toward my stronghold.

The moon will stoop to greet its Lord  
at prima nocta, the one whose watchman

is the lily & whose hireling's the sun.  
The moon's never not female, for some

dumb reason. The women learned  
to read without a cheap ass feuilleton.

Odi et amo, I hate and I love the way  
we talk about flowers. We owe nothing

to each other and therefore nothing  
to the authors who're not yet born.

with dust from the catacombs while  
recalling how to eat properly.

We feasted on ephemera  
to remember the names of the dead.

## STARS AND THE AGGRESSOR

I've smoked exactly fifty times  
more than I should have.

I washed my hammer and felt alive  
when I crushed a spider with my boots.

One time, I watched a boy demystify  
a blade of grass with his teeth

and under a bunch of hemlock  
he buried a picture of the stars

he wanted to bang someday.  
If the story of capitalism begins

with the hammer, my secret admirer  
would be the hawk. He'd swoop at me

and peck at my skull and beneath  
a ravine I'd bury his plumage.

I never took a course in economics  
but when I brush your fingers

I brush the dirt. Figured we'd dine here  
together on leaves, fill our stomachs

## DANTE IN ARKANSAS

I sometimes forget what a radio is  
when I'm harmonizing with it.  
Kids, they have no memory for the stars.  
I've never seen the cliffs of Dover  
but I bet they, too, are rednecks.  
The world is round but the Earth  
looks flat if you squint. I searched  
the landscape for inaccuracies  
like this, despite the music (hereafter  
called "doom") that from the stars  
rushes toward me. Kids, they've loomed  
and eavesdropped on the spheres.  
My tongue's a fog, the source  
of all these noises. My breath's  
been doomed to harmonize with fog.

## COWSLIP'D

You're so busy trying to fuck  
your way through the undergrowth  
that you've forgotten to draw a map.  
A cowslip serves us instead of a hill.  
A tulip will help us to remember  
the names of these mountains.  
I sacrificed a pigeon to the masculine gods  
and a rat to the feminine.  
The Assyrians lacked enough data  
for their cuneiform app.  
One flower for my ritual and one reason  
to kill it: it dies, I don't. It is beautiful  
when the anesthesia wears off.  
I have no lack of flowers because  
I offer nothing to the gods.  
I have no lack of numbers  
since it's what's inside that "counts."  
What is blood? The fluid of memory.  
What is memory? To be smitten by a horn.  
And mathematics? To delight  
in letting the mind wander.  
To offer mercy, in theory, to the sun.

## MEN

You've become a Candide, and your arms are the urchin I had  
always dreamt would vaporize the stars.

You found the spiders picaresque but you couldn't have bested  
them with a rapier. The spiders thought you looked modern in  
your hat.

I prefer the creatures who suffer no infancy.

A bodkin pierces the egg sack.

*Sae rue na ye've come aff wi' me*, I cried while the bruise on my foot  
spread to my ankle.

The bridegroom sipped his Laphroaig while the maiden drank  
through her teeth.

You considered this a poem rife with colloquialisms, a  
landscape with no appetite for dust. The oaks have a face I  
couldn't recognize though you painted them.

The oaks have been painted.



## A LEG OF LAMB

Men who read Madame Blavatsky  
know nothing at all about snow.  
Even the orange was blacklisted  
when the famine spread here.  
A norange once was Persian and  
the speakers misinterpreted it.  
I'll serve you ice from my mint  
julep cup, while you build for me  
a synogogue of rain. The men,  
the ones who attend my séances,  
bring me water, crème fraîche, salt.

A page of Virgil chosen at random  
prophesies their fate. All that's worth  
saving is kept in the archives. Nothing's  
worth saving, the archives have burned.

## IPHIGENIA EN MASSE

There are no bones on your eyelashes  
so I'll put glitter on them.

There's nothing morbid about fire  
if you catch it in time. Me, I am

no archer, though I shoot off arrows.  
I traffic in the fleur-de-lis.

Imagine, if you can, that a ballad  
might be written by a sonneteer.

Suppose there were no dumpstering  
in the sky this evening, that the sun

could dip beneath me as I caught  
a burde in a bour ase beryl so bryht.

I bought a dress from the era  
when perfume was called *scent*—

A spray of violets, a bolt of silk,  
plus a croched version of my body.

The velvet on my fists  
has never been so smooth.

## TERRA INCOGNITA

It's true, there is no Walter Raleigh  
to comb the dirt for gold tonight.  
I've been collecting data on the fruits  
of yesteryear. For me, the plums  
whizz naturally, hold no congress  
with the orchard as they fall.  
The sky laments its pyrotechnics  
because it used to be a painter.  
Only since the Paleolithic has it  
had so much to burn. Mankind  
has eaten my fruit over the centuries  
but doesn't understand metaphor.  
We didn't eat plums. We wrote music.  
Inevitably, we learned to speak.

## THE SQUARE ROOT OF NO

To die is better than to be resurrected  
the mountain said. I did whippets  
and the clouds fell straight to the ground.  
If student loans sit beside me, then debt  
is my Beatrice. All canticles end in "stelle"  
now that we're all gone. A meal of Blue  
Nile lotus for the dead in Mesopotamia,  
a meal of terza rima for the so-called souls  
in what-we-sometimes-call paradise.  
To die is better than to be beautiful,  
quothe the lotuses. This is not a poem  
about my husband though now that I've  
said the word "husband" it has to be.

## THE ANCIENTS

The stars've left no hoofprints  
for the predators to follow.  
I knew no way to immunize the dead.  
The ancients scrawl their epitaphs  
as a carriage draws past them,  
as a marquee looms over them.  
A virus called the hinterlands  
will silence them for good.  
How does the landscape profit from  
my chaste and manly diction?  
How many pixels will it take  
to entertain the dead? The dissidents  
took to the streets that morning  
I kept very still, marooned  
somewhere west of the prairie.  
You've nothing to offer the twilight  
as it molders below my equipage.  
You think you're funny yet the stars  
are tragicomic when they lisp.

## THE ZONE

The facts as I understand them  
go something like this—A thorn  
is sentient when the wind despises it.  
The animals were spooked  
if ever there were any.  
My hair's become the knight errant  
in this scenario, my arm's the imp.  
I'm all bling without the diaspora.  
I sleep inside the lion's mouth.  
It's true, I lived in a very old house  
not too far from Clark Park.  
The trees grew tired of anonymity  
so they signed their names to the leaves.  
Meadows looked like meth-  
amphetamines and blossoms had no eyes  
with which to see themselves, though I did.  
The poem is not a field so I figured  
I'd shed some light on meadows here.  
A world that's elsewhere, is it built  
out of images? With a modicum of speech?  
For me, it come in sequences.  
Not not flowers, but the vertigo of sight.  
And who are the counterfeiters?  
The ones who compose their work.

## THE ITERATIONS

Not Cervantes, but Ángel Asturias.  
A cloud sluts its way toward the sun.

The administration sold their campus  
to the interested parties, the grass

kept harping on the wickedness of turf.  
Me, I laid myself down and pondered

the consciousness of the stars  
as they appeared in this photograph.

Not a hawk, but a goshawk's  
laid to rest in my mouth.

The economic crisis was no crisis  
of the stars, though an astronomer

could have predicted it. While I gloss  
the extant pages, let the blossoms

be my georgic, the spikenard my psalm.  
So long as I'm here I will purchase

a bushel of apples, a smallish one,  
and a well-wrought drawing of Miguel

Ángel Asturias. You never could  
pronounce "oeuvre" without spitting it.

The aforementioned "it" refers to what-  
ever you can see—the sun, the veins

on your hand after I've chopped it off.  
In my imagination, that is.